



MOLDOVA: MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS RESEARCH



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media and search engines are the two most popular sources of news and information for Moldovans. A high proportion also use TV, although younger adults are much less likely to do so. Facebook, YouTube and Viber are the most popular social media platforms for news and information. Nevertheless, TV media outlets are frequently cited as the most preferred source.

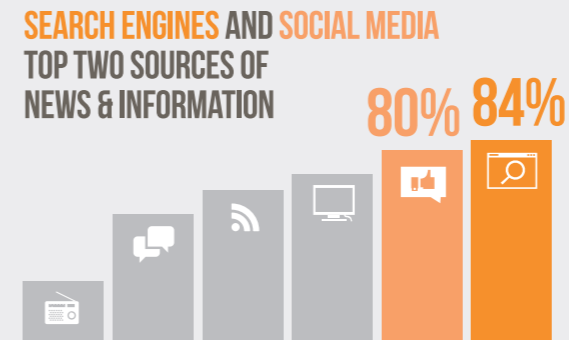
A minority of those surveyed for the purposes of this report have complete trust in the media – just 19% trust the news most of the time. This is not unique to Moldova and some degree of scepticism is to be expected, and is welcome. There are signs of decreasing trust in public broadcasters and TV, but this is not the case for local independent media or foreign media sources (although fewer people access the latter). Fake stories ('fakes') and propaganda are seen to be widespread across the media (particularly in social media, many suggest), although people are more trusting of commentators and experts.

Our research identifies a number of challenges facing independent media in Moldova. The first is a lack of awareness of independent media outlets – only about one in four respondents know of any; the second is a general scepticism

or ambivalence as to the benefits that independent media provide. For instance, only 18% trust information provided by independent media, and only two in five think this type of media produces worthwhile, unique content.

Many of those surveyed have a clear sense of what good journalism should look like and acknowledge that being independent may be part of this. But they also believe good journalism includes the quality of the reporting, the skills of the journalist and the ability to communicate well.

Most respondents admit they do not currently consume neutral, detached and objective journalism and fewer than half think that the media they use asks tough questions of influential and powerful people. A relatively high proportion (20%) think that Covid-19 is a hoax, and to some extent this is blamed on perceptions of media coverage of the pandemic.



“Any media - print, television or the Internet - they still present someone’s point of view. And if you fully trust them, then everything is lost.”



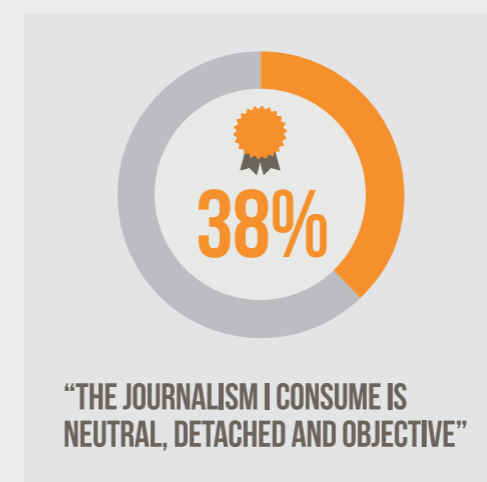
“CAN TRUST INFORMATION PROVIDED BY INDEPENDENT MEDIA”



“DO NOT THINK THERE IS INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN MOLDOVA”



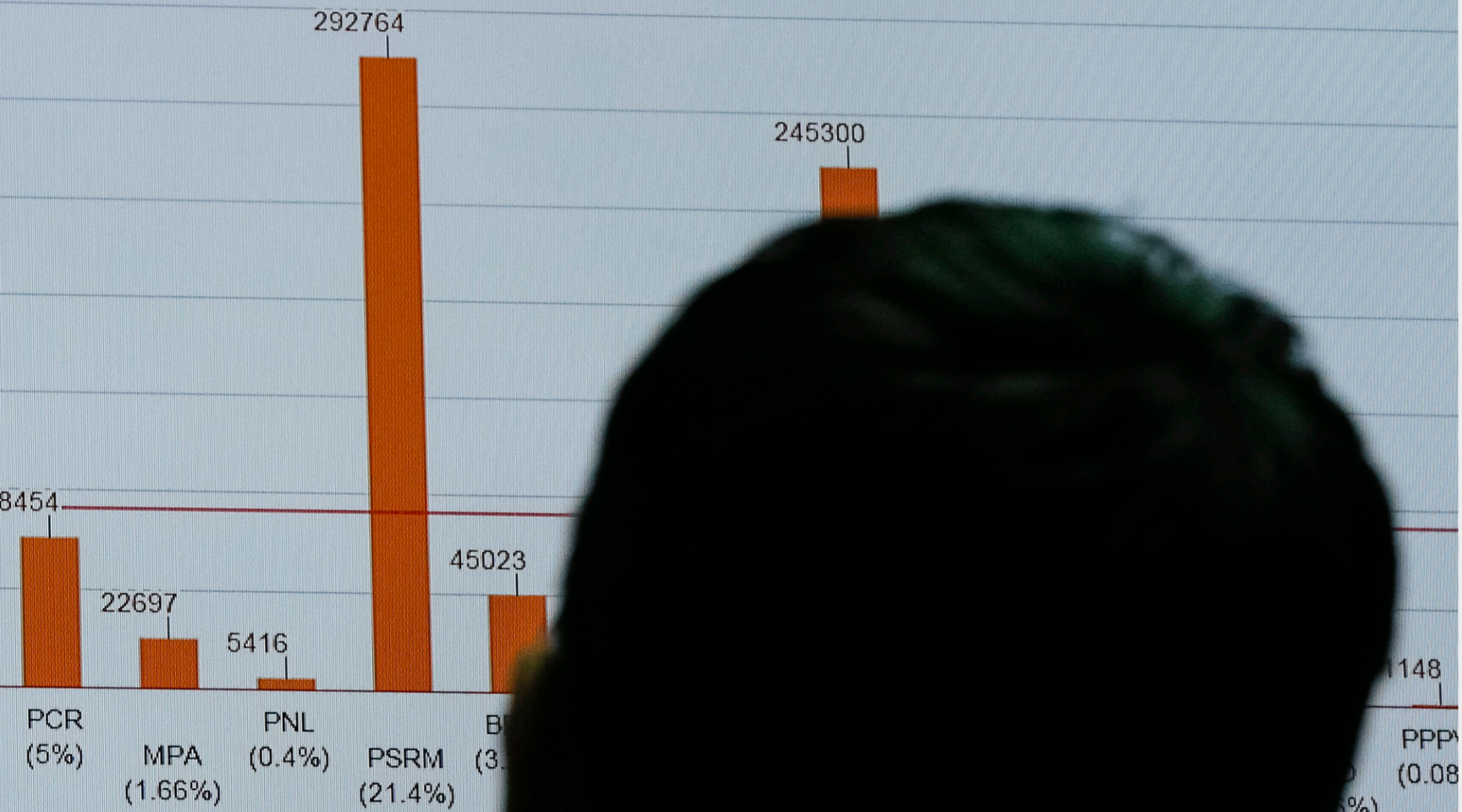
“IN INDEPENDENT MEDIA YOU CAN OFTEN FIND INFORMATION THAT IS NOT FOUND IN OTHER MEDIA”



“There is no independent press, there is always a certain direction. There may be a multipolar press, which would express several opinions, but completely independent - it does not exist.”

Moldova
ate 1839 din 2073 (88.71 %)

e 63154



METHODOLOGY

This report is based on quantitative and qualitative research with the adult population living in Moldova.

The quantitative research used a random sampling approach to obtain a representative sample of adults (aged over 18) living in all 35 rayons (administrative districts) of Moldova, both rural and urban areas. The spread of interviews was 18% in the capital, 34% in the central region, 27% in the northern region and 21% in the southern region.

All respondents were interviewed by telephone and a total of 500 successful interviews were completed between 30 November and 9 December 2020.

They were conducted by Opina, a professional social and market research agency based in Moldova.

The respondents were 49% male and 51% female. The age distribution was split between 45% aged 18-35 years, 40% aged 36-55 years and 15% aged 56 years or older. Of those interviewed, 27% were educated to secondary level, 37% had completed professional school or college, and a further 37% had achieved higher education (licence/master's/PhD). One in four (26%) had never taken a foreign holiday, just over half (53%) had taken one in the last three years and

the remainder (21%) had taken one more than three years ago.

The quantitative research was designed to provide statistically reliable data on the media consumption behaviour of adults living in Moldova and to measure their attitudes to the media landscape in their country.

In addition, to provide a more granular understanding of why people hold particular views, four focus groups were conducted in February 2021. These focus groups were recruited and moderated by researchers from Opina and held virtually. In total, 24 participants from a broad cross-section of adults across Moldova took part.



REUTERS/Valery Korchmar

BACKGROUND

This research is funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Independent Media in the Eastern Partnership States. The Thomson Reuters Foundation, in partnership with BBC Media Action, is delivering assistance to independent media in Moldova, focusing on media partners operating in the cities of Rezina, Soroca, Taraglia and Ungheni, and at national levels. The purpose of this research is threefold; 1) to contribute to the baseline for future programming; 2) to support identification of additional activities to assist media to increase their core audience and build trust; and 3) to provide independent media with audience insights which they might not otherwise be able to access. These include key issues such as audience understanding of good journalism, audience interpretation of independent media, and how people access news and information on social media and other platforms.

Moldova's media landscape improved when a new coalition government was elected in 2009.¹ In the following year, Moldova rose in the annual Press Freedom Index published by Freedom House, a score of 65 to 55². This was one of the largest numerical jumps of that year's Index and granted Moldova a status upgrade to Partly Free. The

result reflected the new ruling coalition's steps to increase legal protections for journalists and to reform the regulatory framework.³ However, despite government pledges to reform legislation and support the development of an independent press, such commitments were only partially implemented, with many promised provisions regarding media liberalisation and freedom of expression yet to be realised.⁴ Since 2013, Moldova's score in the World Press Freedom Index has consistently declined, and it was ranked 91 (out of 180) in the 2020 Index.⁵ Reporters Without Borders noted that "as media outlets battle with each other in a climate exacerbated by political polarization, the broadcasting regulatory authority's lack of independence continues to be a source of concern".⁶ Similarly, Freedom House notes in its Freedom in the World 2021 report that the Moldovan media environment is dominated by outlets linked to political parties, and says reporters have faced difficulty accessing publicly important information along with threats of legal action from public figures and politicians.⁷ In 2019, the investigative journalism group RISE Moldova revealed that since 2017, many opposition leaders, civic activists and journalists had been wiretapped by state authorities. A year later, journalists

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202011%20Full%20Release%20Booklet.pdf>

² As above, page 9

³ As above, page 9

⁴ <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-situation7>

⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/moldova>

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2021>

⁷ As above

were also affected by the government’s Covid-19 response when the Moldovan media regulator attempted to restrict outlets from quoting unofficial sources – though this decision was reversed a day later.⁸

Against this backdrop it is important to enhance the capabilities of independent media that can be trusted as part of creating more free, fair, and informed societies. The need for trusted information sources has become even more urgent during the Covid-19 pandemic and ‘infodemic’, where audiences require objective, clear and concise reporting to make, in some instances, life-saving decisions. As the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism highlights in its The Trust in News Project, trust is one of the most important commodities for media and constitutes “the new currency for success”. The Institute argues that it is not just a founding principle for journalism but also important to media business models that are increasingly reliant on direct revenue from subscribers and supporters.⁹

The findings of this research will be used to help the donor community, practitioners and independent media in Moldova to better understand their audience’s perceptions of independent media and good journalism, and to make recommendations of how to enhance the ability of independent media to reach and retain their audience and to raise awareness within

Moldova of the presence and importance of independent media.

⁸ As above
⁹ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/what-we-think-we-know-and-what-we-want-know-perspectives-trust-news-changing-world>



Dumitru Ciorici



REUTERS/Gleb Garanich

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

The survey respondents were asked where they liked to get their news from and which sources they used most often. The most frequently used sources of information for news were social media (72% use daily and 84% at least weekly) and search engines (61% daily and 80% weekly). The next most popular were TV (70% weekly) and news aggregators (63% weekly).

More traditional media were a less popular source of news; only 29% used radio for this at least weekly, and fewer still newspapers (11%).

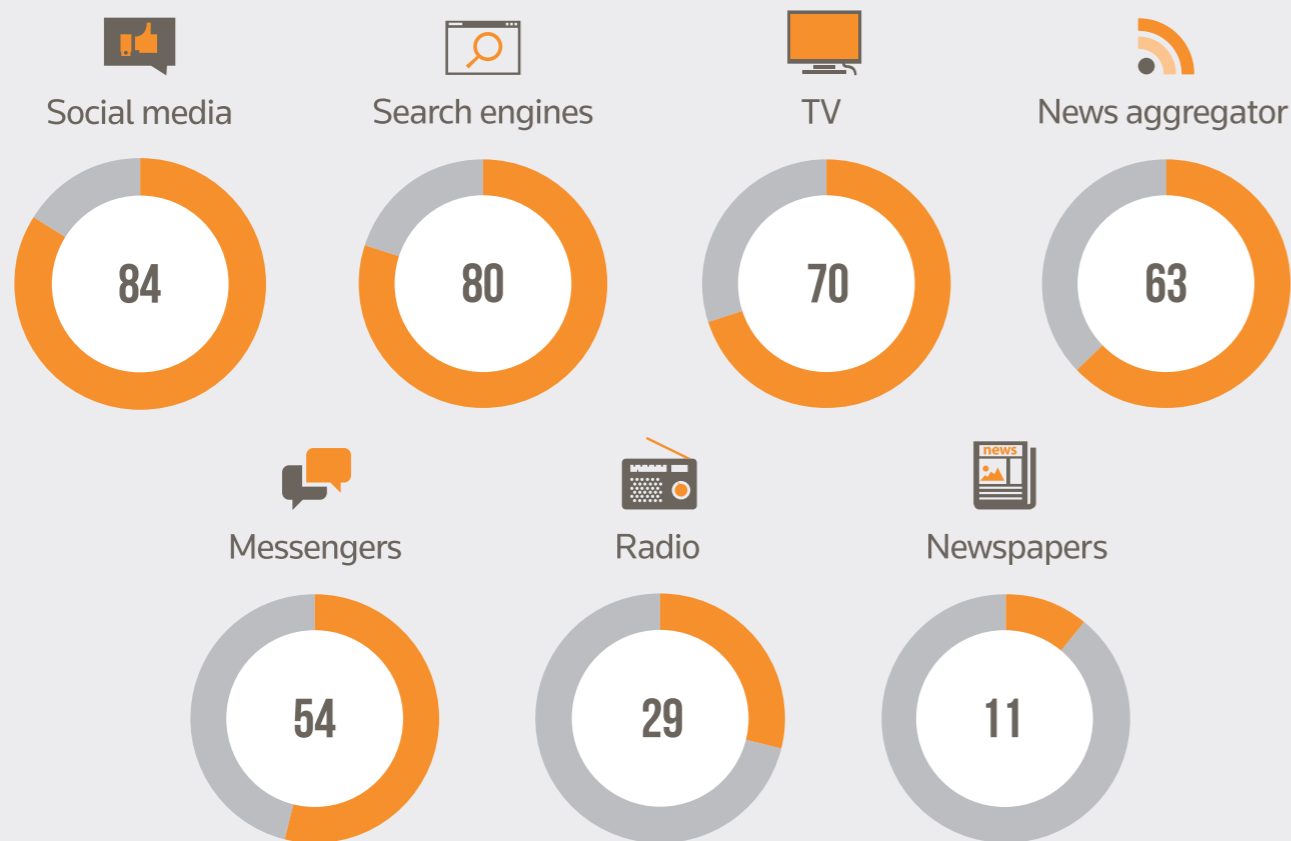
More women than men get news from TV (79% vs. 60% weekly), whereas a higher proportion of men than women use radio (34% vs. 25%). There are much bigger differences by age, with younger adults significantly more likely to rely on digital platforms. TV remains the most popular channel for those aged over 55 years (89% use it weekly), but social media is dominant for those aged 18-35 years (93%). This pattern is consistent for all the different types of media covered in Chart 1. News aggregators are much more frequently used by those with higher levels of education.

Just over half (53%) consult the same media sources every day. Focus group participants say that there are several ways of accessing information, and it is impossible to get the desired volume of information and be sure of its veracity by relying on a single media source. For this

reason, users most often access multiple sources, combining information received from TV with that from the internet or vice versa.

CHART 1: SOURCES OF NEWS¹⁰

% who like to get their news from the following sources (at least weekly)



A clear majority of adults surveyed never use some types of sources for their news, including 74% who never use newspapers, 60% who never use radio and 43% who never use messengers. In contrast, just 11% never use social media and 14% never use search engines.

For the latest information, focus group participants said they used the news bulletins and political talk shows on TV and the pages of online media. To reach narrow segments of topics, participants directly accessed internet platforms or Google. The advantage of media outlets on social media, they said, was the ability to read comments and to see reactions to a particular topic.

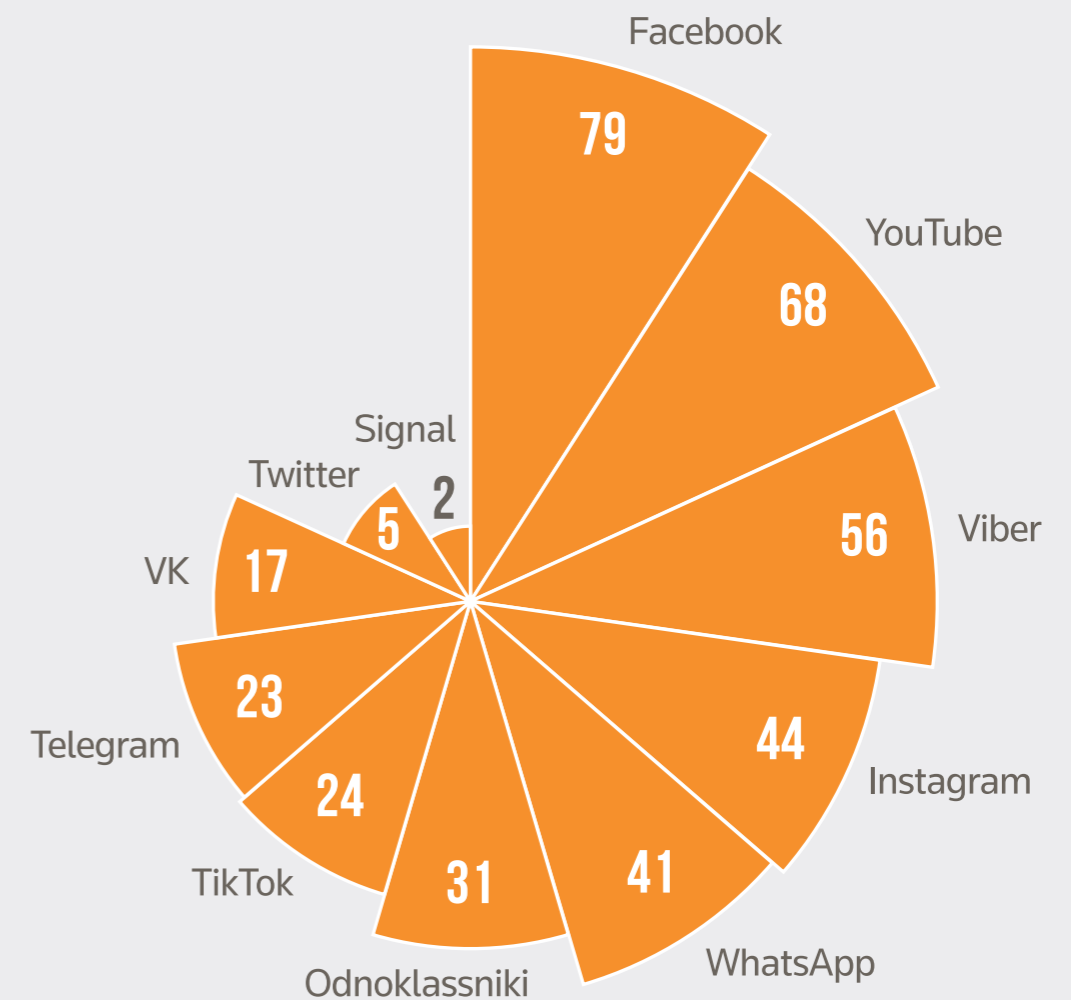
¹⁰ Websites/online media were not among the news sources asked about. However, based on a similar question asked in Ukraine we would expect a high level of use (similar to social media or search engines) had they been asked.

Facebook is the dominant social media platform for news and the latest information in Moldova. It is the only platform accessed by more than half the adults surveyed for news and information on a daily basis (65%) – the next two most common being YouTube (44%) and Viber (42%).

Eight in 10 access Facebook at least weekly for news and information, followed by YouTube (68%) and Viber (56%), as illustrated in Chart 2.

CHART 2: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NEWS AND LATEST INFORMATION

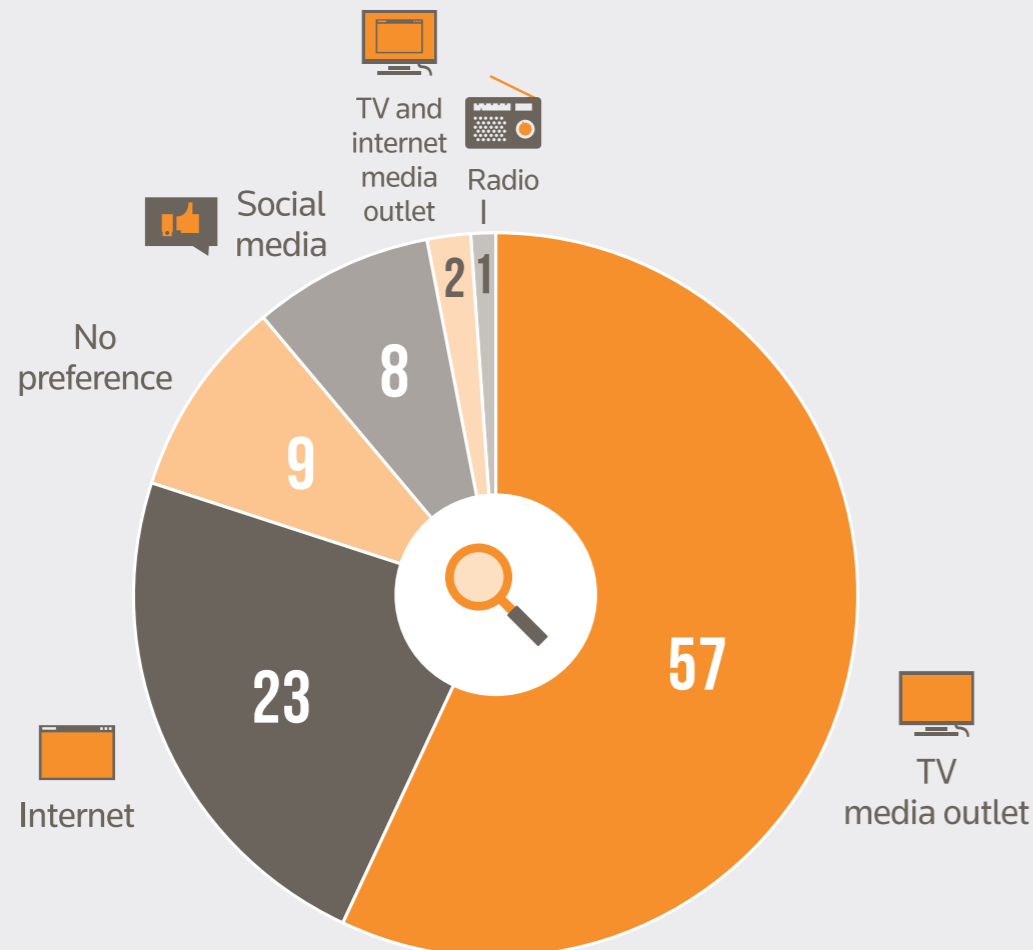
% who use each type of social media / messenger to get news and latest information (at least weekly)



Despite the above findings, when asked to name their favourite news outlet or source of information (without providing any specific options), TV channels were more likely to be identified than social media platforms. In this case, 17% of adults said ProTV was their favoured news outlet (highest rated), followed by JurnalTV (10%) and TV8 (9%). In contrast, just one in 20 said Facebook (5%).

The answers provided by the survey respondents were categorised by media type (see Chart 3). Almost three in five (57%) chose 'TV media outlet', which was more than twice as popular as the internet (23%). Relatively few chose one of the other four sources and 9% had no preference.

CHART 3: FAVOURITE NEWS SOURCES BY TYPE OF CHANNEL



More women than men chose TV media outlet (63% vs. 52%), but more men than women chose internet (28% vs. 17%). Considerably more older adults favour TV media outlets than do younger adults (78% vs. 53%), whereas a quarter (25%) of younger adults selected the internet against just 9% of older people. The internet is also more favoured among those with higher levels of education.

By far the most important reason respondents gave for selecting their preferred news source was that the content aligned with their personal interests (51% gave this reason). The next most common response was that the reporting aligned with their personal values/political views, but this was selected by just one in 10 (10%) respondents; a similar proportion said other news outlets/sources of information were not trustworthy (9%). Only 2% said they chose their news source on the basis that it was independent. These findings were similar for men and women, and across age groups.

The fact that being perceived to be “independent” is not a driver of choice in media consumption habits is very important in the context of this study. Not only do independent media need to ensure they are available on platforms people want to use – in this case TV and social media platforms – but they also need to provide content that is interesting to potential consumers. Just being – or being seen to be – independent appears likely to have little traction on its own.

Participants in the focus group discussed their reasons for using a particular news source. TV channels such as Publika TV, ProTV, Jurnal TV,

TV8, Prime and Moldova 1 were most frequently mentioned as the channels people turned to. Publika TV was mentioned more often in this context thanks to the continuous broadcasting of news bulletins in both Russian and Romanian languages. For internet platforms, point.md was frequently mentioned, thanks to its coverage of both national and international news. Other frequently used news sites were unimedia.md, stiri.md, zdg.md, newsmaker.md, realitatea.md, moldpress.md, timpul.md and Google News.

If a national event unfolds with new details during the day, respondents tend to follow it on social media, especially on platforms that offer live broadcasting or on TV. Multiple sources are used at the same time, because each media outlet interprets the same event differently.

“ THE TRUTH IS ALWAYS SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN, SO I TRY TO GET AT THIS TRUTH FROM EVERY SOURCE AS MUCH AS I CAN.

“ I ACCESS A LOT OF SOURCES; I STUDY THE NEWS BY COMPARISON. I READ POINT.MD AND STIRI.MD. ONE IS FOR RUSSIAN SPEAKERS, ANOTHER FOR ROMANIAN SPEAKERS – AND I COMPARE THEM. I ALSO READ THE COMMENTS TO HEAR THE OPINIONS OF BOTH COMMUNITIES.

Participants said they were not likely to use politically affiliated media sources, because they only broadcast information favourable to the image of the agency’s owners or financiers.

NEWS ON THE INTERNET

The public was asked specifically about how they accessed news on the internet and what type of news and information they liked. The results are shown in Chart 4.

The vast majority (80%) said they were interested in social issues reporting in Moldova. In contrast, only three in ten (29%) agreed that they preferred local/regional news to news about the country as a whole. This demonstrates the importance of independent media focusing on national news with a social dimension.

The research also suggests that people are more likely than not to verify news they see on TV/social media. Just over half of respondents (54%) do and a quarter do not (26%); the

remainder could not say. This reflects the findings from the focus group discussions, as explored above.

There is demand for in-depth reporting: 51% liked this compared with 15% who did not; and there appears to be a close relationship between news channels used and personal values and beliefs: 49% said they often used media sources that aligned with their values/beliefs, compared with just 14% who said they did not.

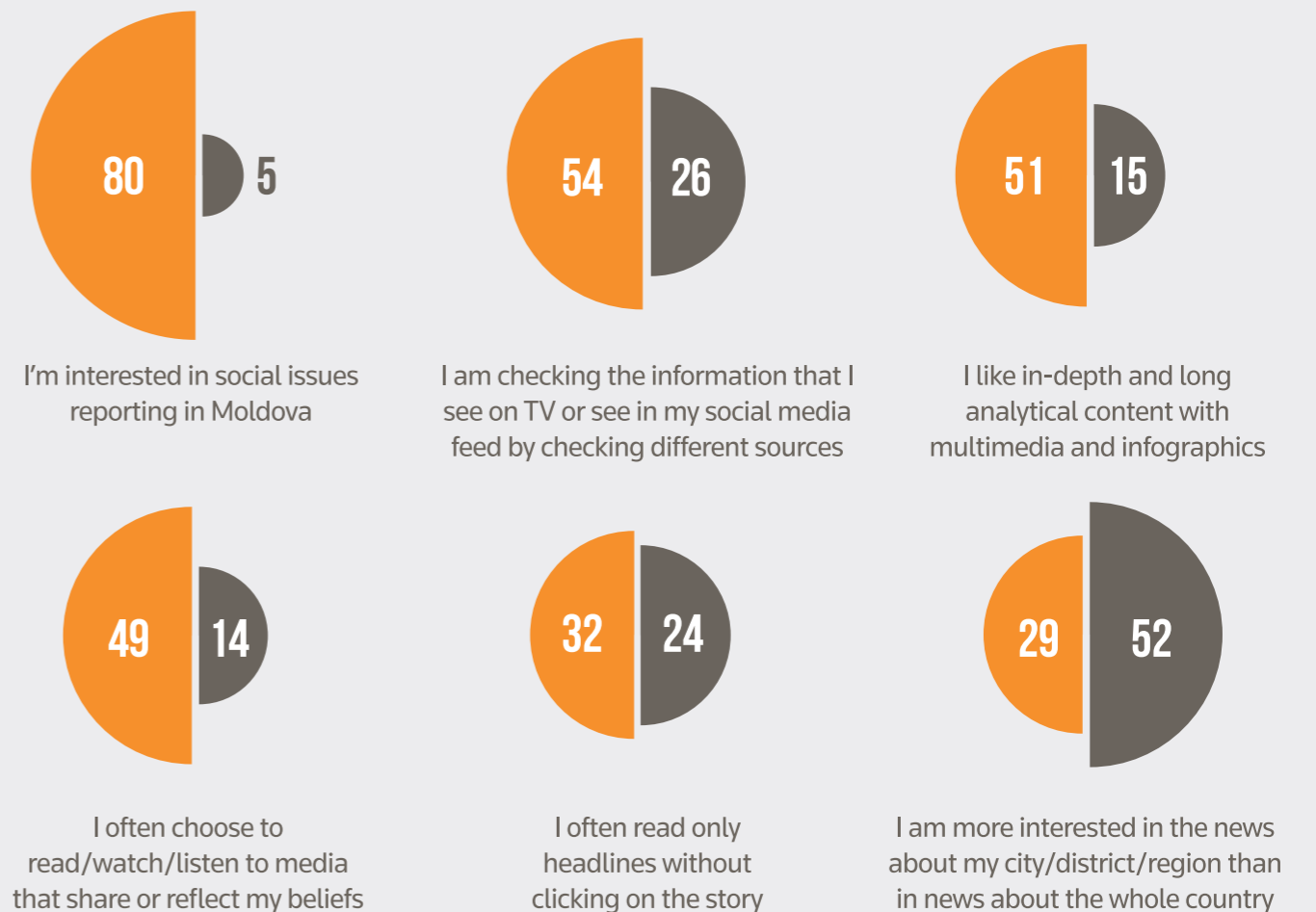
Around a third (32%) said they often read headlines without clicking on the story, which demonstrates the importance of appealing headlines to encourage users to read the full story.



REUTERS/Vladislav Culiomza

CHART 4: READING NEWS ON THE INTERNET

% agree or disagree with each statement



Attitudes towards news on the internet are similar for men and women, and across age groups. There are some differences by education – those with higher levels of education are

somewhat more likely to like in-depth reporting and to verify information from multiple sources, but less likely to be interested in local news.



REUTERS/Gleb Garanich

TRUST IN MEDIA

Just one in five (19%) of respondents agreed with the statement that they trusted most news most of the time, although a further 54% said they somewhat agreed. Nevertheless, more than one in four (27%) disagreed with the statement. Slightly more men than women do not trust most news most of the time (31% vs. 23%). There was no difference by age. Further detailed statistical analysis reveals that the demographic background of the respondents (e.g. age, gender, educational level) does not predict levels of trust in the news to any great extent.

Data from Eurobarometer,¹¹ which covers all 27 members of the European Union, helps to put these findings into context. It asked a differently worded question than was used in this survey and therefore the results are not directly comparable. However, Eurobarometer reports that in Autumn 2019, 10% of EU adults said they “definitely agreed” that the media in their country provided trustworthy information, and a further 46% agreed “to some extent”. Therefore, we would not expect most people in Moldova to say they “trust the media all of the time”, as scepticism is part of a healthy democracy. The highest proportions of “definite” trust in the EU are found in Denmark, Finland (both 28%) and Sweden (24%).

Respondents to our survey were asked to select the type of source of news and information which they deemed the most reliable and trustworthy from a list of four options. The most popular choice was TV (31%), slightly ahead of social media (24%). Both were considerably more likely to be selected than online news websites (16%). Only 3% rated radio and 2% messengers the most trustworthy. One in five people (20%) said that they did not trust any of the sources. Older adults were significantly more likely to select TV than other age groups, reflecting consumption patterns, and 36% of women chose TV compared with 27% of men.

Another way in which trust was considered was in terms of the background of different types of media. From this perspective, local independent media outlets (36%) were most likely to be seen as the most reliable and trustworthy source of news and information, ahead of public broadcasters and TV (27%). The remainder selected foreign media sources (10%) or none of these (27%). While views were consistent between women and men, there was a sharp contrast by age: 46% of adults aged over 55 selected public broadcasters and TV compared with 27% of those aged 18-35 years. In contrast, 41% of under 35s selected local independent media outlets, compared with 28% of the over 55s.

¹¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2255>

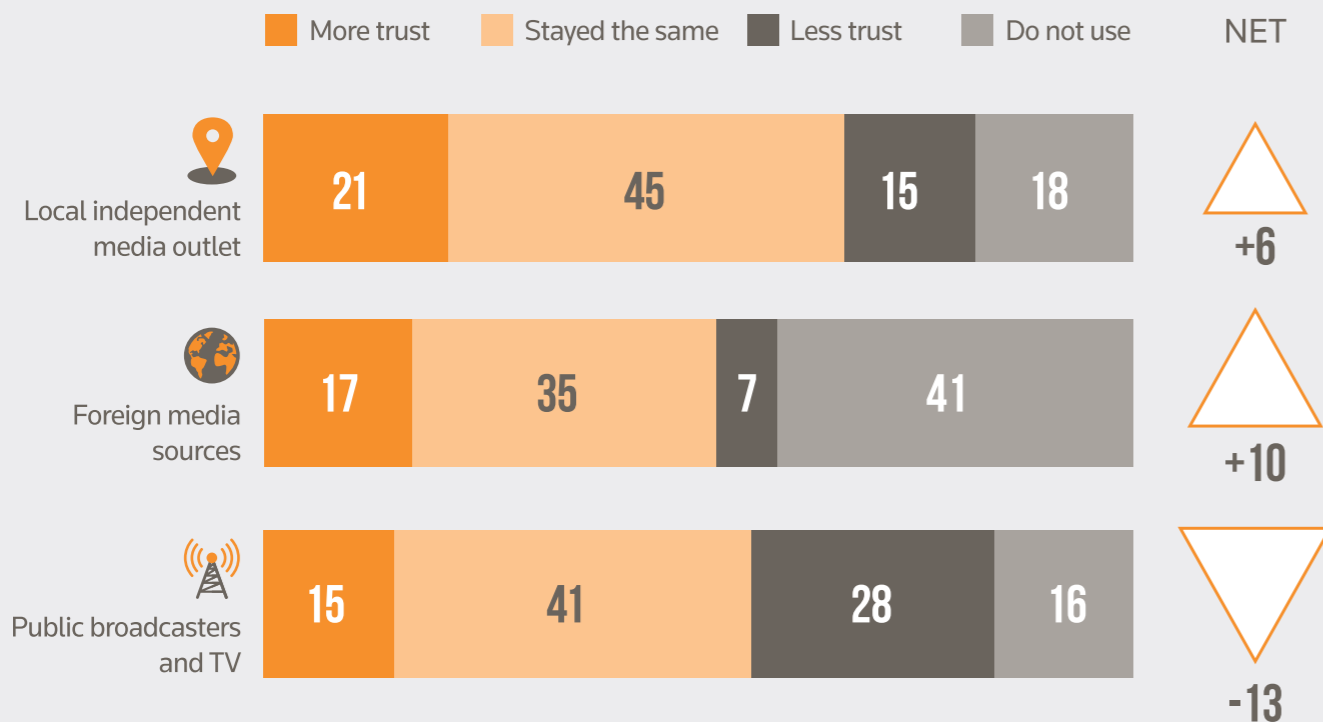
Part of the explanation for the lower levels of trust in foreign media may be that more people simply do not use this type of media – as many as four in ten (41%) said they did not use foreign media sources, compared with 18% of the public who were non-consumers of local independent media and 16% who avoided public broadcasters and TV.

Chart 5 shows how people say their levels of trust in these three sources of news and information has changed over the past three years. The net score is calculated as the difference between those who say they have

“more trust” minus those who have “less trust”. A positive (+) net score suggests increasing levels of trust overall. The most common response was that the respondents did not think their views had changed much (blue bars). However, more felt their trust in public broadcasters and TV had fallen (28%) rather than risen (15%) – giving a net score of -13. This is not the pattern with the other two types of media: in these cases, slightly more felt trust had risen rather than fallen, giving a net score of +6 for local independent media (21% more trust vs. 15% less trust) and +10 for foreign media sources (17% more trust vs. 7% less trust).

CHART 5: CHANGE IN TRUST OVER TIME

Q: How much, if at all, would you say your trust in each of the following has changed in the past 3 years?



Attitudes are similar between men and women. The differences by age are mainly driven by the fact that a higher proportion of young people don't consume public broadcasters and TV, and that more older people said they don't consume foreign media sources. Nevertheless, younger adults' net trust in local independent media is +9, but -3 among older adults.

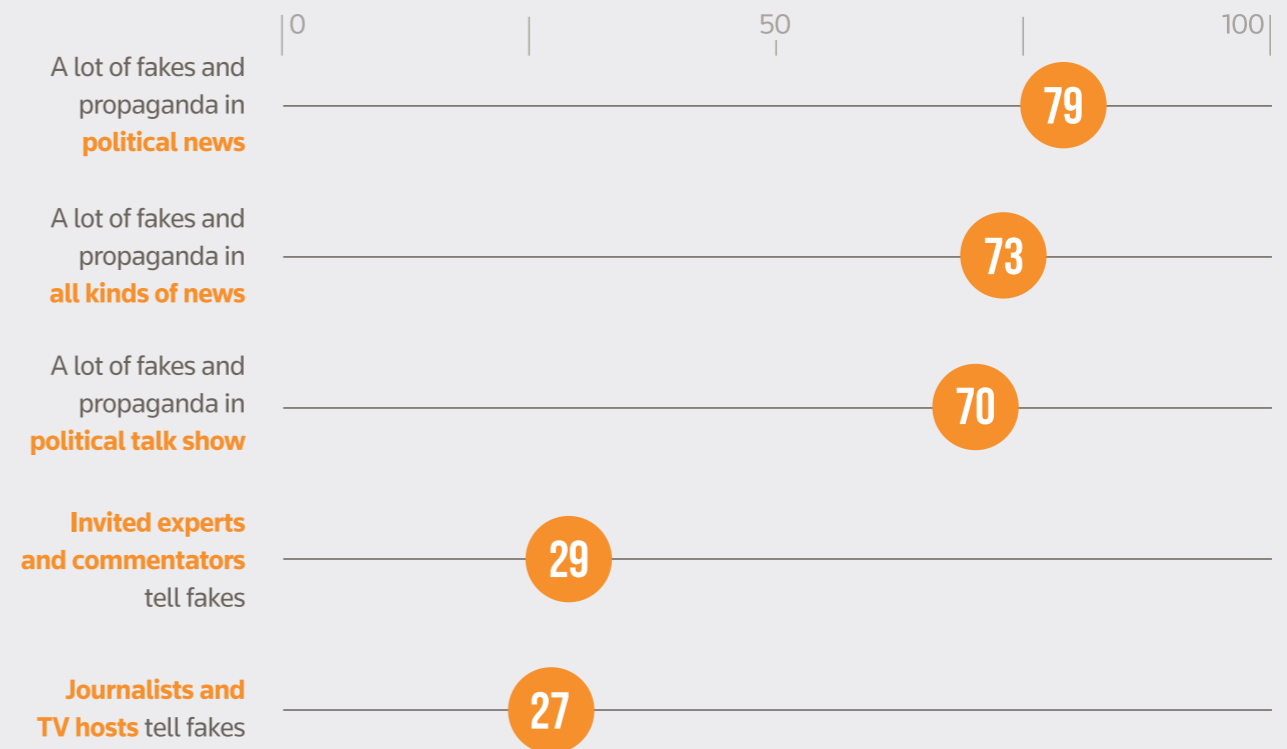
To explore attitudes towards the media in more depth, survey respondents were also asked their views on the extent to which “fakes and propaganda”¹² are present in the media. This question was asked about different media settings,

from news generally to political programmes, and then specifically in relation to experts, commentators and journalists. Chart 6 shows the proportion of adults who agreed with each statement in relation to fakes and propaganda.

There was widespread agreement that there are a lot of fakes and propaganda in the media. Four in five felt this was true of political news (79%) and almost as many felt this happened across all kinds of news (73%) and political talk shows (70%). Only a very small proportion disagreed that fake stories existed in these settings.

CHART 6: FAKES AND PROPAGANDA

% agree with each statement



¹²This terminology is widely used in Moldova and easier to understand than concepts such as misinformation, disinformation or mal-information

At the same time, relatively few people (27%) believed that journalists and TV hosts tell fakes or that invited experts and commentators do (29%). This is quite a striking difference in attitudes: on the one hand there is significant scepticism about news and media generally but on the other much more faith in individual personalities, commentators and experts.

Generally, men were more likely than women to agree with each of the statements, for example that journalists and TV hosts tell fakes (32% of men agree vs. 22% of women) and that there are a lot of fakes and propaganda in political news (84% vs. 75%). Views were roughly similar across age groups.

The focus group participants discussed the issue of fake news and information in the media. The problem of fakes is seen as a pressing issue, driven by the increasing number of media outlets and the increasing role of social media. Fakes can range from disinformation to propaganda, and many felt it was increasingly difficult to quickly identify false information given how quickly news can spread online. Participants believed that the aim of fakes varied from damaging someone's reputation, inciting hatred in society, sowing discord, and distracting from important problems to generating ad revenue via web traffic. It was generally agreed that fakes are a particular problem on the internet.

- “ OFTEN IT IS EITHER A COMPLETE ABSENCE OF FACTS OR IT IS LOUD SCREAMING HEADLINES.
- “ YOU CAN PROBABLY READ FAKES ON THE INTERNET MORE OFTEN BECAUSE IT IS NOT CLEAR WHO WRITES THEM – ANYONE CAN WRITE WHATEVER THEY WANT.

Fake information can normally be identified because:

- Articles lack references to official sources
- The news is not available or is covered in a different ways in other authoritative publications
- The information given tries to diminish or inflate the value of an event, organisation or person without supporting facts
- The information focuses on the personal lives of famous people, alluding to issues without giving details
- The headlines are “loud” or clearly sensationalist

Some people say they use several sources to check on the veracity of information, but others acknowledge that they do not have the skills to identify false news. Sometimes fake news appears of a very high quality and can easily be misleading. Another factor that makes identification of fake stories more difficult is that

they appear on platforms that appear to imitate well-known websites.

- “ I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO IDENTIFY FAKE NEWS ... I THINK IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO CHECK A WELL-DESIGNED FAKE. SOME SPECIFIC WORK IS REQUIRED, AND I AM NOT VERY GOOD AT IT.

- “ IF I WANT TO MAKE SURE IT IS TRUE, THEN I TRY TO FIND THE ORIGINAL SOURCE. OFTEN, MANY NEWS CHANNELS ARE LIKE PARASITES, THEY JUST REPRINT ARTICLES AND DO NOT EVEN REALLY UNDERSTAND THEM. THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT METHODS OF CHECKING.



REUTERS/Gleb Garanic



REUTERS/Gleb Garanich

UNDERSTANDING OF INDEPENDENT NEWS

Around a third of respondents (33%) did not think there were independent media¹³ in Moldova, a third (33%) thought there were, and a third (34%) were unsure. Older people were less likely to think independent media exists.

When asked to name the media organisations they perceived as independent, around one in four (27%) had heard of independent media outlets in Moldova, but the vast majority (73%) had not. This was true for men and women, and across different age groups.

The media most likely to be regarded as independent were TV8, ProTV, JurnalTV and Ziarul de Garda. All of these outlets are indeed independent.

In the focus groups, the participants were asked to identify media they judged to be independent. Most found it difficult to name totally independent media outlets, as participants considered that most outlets provided biased products and were always dependent on their source of funding.

Some characteristics that could signify a level of independence include, according to the focus group participants, include:

- Funding by foreign organisations
- The image of the presenters or hosts, in particular their professionalism and knowledge
- The encouragement of debate and different perspectives on a topic by moderators of TV programmes
- The presence of news and facts that do not appear to favour a particular party or person
- The lack of dependence on finance from politicians, and therefore the ability to uncover and expose corruption

The general perception of the main traditional media brands was that these were in the hands of a select few and adhered to the interests of their owners. These included those brands linked to or owned by politicians and business people. Nevertheless, some participants consumed news and information provided by media outlets they considered to be non-independent, often feeling that they were able to make their own judgements on individual stories.

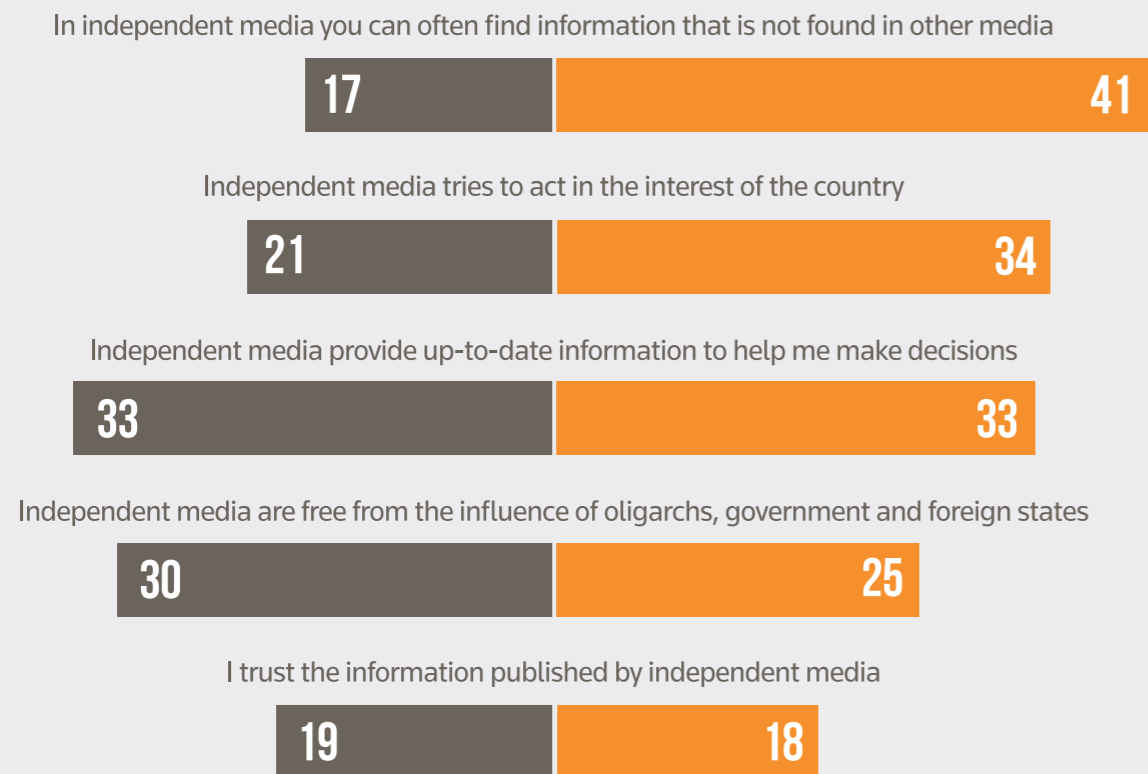
¹³ Described as media outlets outside the ownership of the state or oligarchs and free from foreign influence.

“ IF I KNEW THAT THE MEDIA OUTLET BELONGED TO SOME PARTY OR SOMEONE ELSE, BUT THE REST OF THEIR NEWS WAS TRUE, I WOULD LOVE TO WATCH IT. I WOULD JUST IGNORE THE NEWS THAT I KNEW BEFOREHAND WERE FALSIFIED OR EVEN SIMPLY UNTRUE.

Reflecting the low awareness of independent media in Moldova, survey respondents were ambivalent about and unsure how to assess the characteristics of this type of media. As shown in the following chart, there were no widespread positive attitudes towards independent media.

CHART 7: ATTITUDES TO INDEPENDENT MEDIA

% agree or disagree with each statement



Respondents were split over whether independent media provided information to help them make decisions (33% agreed but 33% disagreed), and there was a similar split over whether information from independent media could be trusted (18% agreeing vs. 19% disagreeing).

Perhaps part of the explanation is that, on balance, people do not see independent media as truly independent. One in four (25%) agreed that independent outlets were free from the influence of oligarchs, state and foreign powers – but slightly more (30%) disagreed that this was the case.

The main difference by gender on attitudes towards independent media was that more men than women disagreed that independent media were free from oligarchs, state and foreign powers (36% vs. 24%). Younger adults tended to be more positive towards independent media than older people.

The focus group participants were shown two news articles about a recent topic (a visit by the President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, to Brussels and associated expenses) – one produced by a partisan outlet and one by an independent media organisation. Article 1 was produced by a pro-Russian newspaper in Moldova that focused exclusively on the allegedly luxurious hotel used by the Moldovan president and comparing her to the “Queen”. Article 2 was a short fact-based story from a leading Moldovan digital outlet, which provided a scanned copy of a document detailing state expenses during the president’s visit to Brussels.

The participants discussed the quality of the journalism in both articles and whether they considered either, both or neither to be independent.

The first article was perceived as a manipulation of public opinion and a denigration of the president. It was criticised for offering meaningless details, lots of pictures with no references, and giving no information about the purpose of the visit and its outcome. Overall, it was seen as an attempt to besmirch the image of the president.

“ IT WAS PUBLISHED BY DEPENDENT AGENCIES THAT PROBABLY WANTED TO BE IRONIC ABOUT THIS SITUATION.

“ SHE’S BEEN THE PRESIDENT FOR A MONTH ONLY, AND THERE IS NOTHING MORE TO WRITE ABOUT HER.

The second article received a mixed reaction. Some considered it an example of independent media, while some felt it was biased. It was seen as independent because of the presence of facts and its reference to an official source (the presidential website), meaning that the information could be verified. According to this analysis, the story contained only factual data and was not an attempt to persuade the audience of a particular viewpoint, but an account of how public money was used on the visit in Brussels.

Those who were critical of the second article argued that its purpose was to depict the presidency as a transparent body that open about its expenses. It did not include a link to the presidential website, and reproduced a picture from the website with no context, comments or remarks. Some felt the article was less a news story than an information note.

“ VERY SUCCINCT, BUT TRUTHFUL, WITHOUT TEXT AND IRONY.

“ IT CAN ALSO BE A SCREENSHOT, BUT IT CAN STILL BE FALSIFIED. IT SHOULD HAVE INCLUDED A LINK TO THE OFFICIAL SOURCE.

The focus group participants characterised independent media as able to express opinion, conduct investigations, draw conclusions based on evidence and sources, and produce content independent of any party. However, participants believed that reliable media require funding to cover salaries, field trips, access to databases, equipment and software, training, etc. Because in Moldova oligarch or politician owners provide that backing, a relationship of dependence has evolved, several participants believed – resulting in a submissive media guided by owners’ interests. As long as corruption exists in the country, there will be no independent media, they think.

“ **THERE IS NO INDEPENDENT PRESS, THERE IS ALWAYS A CERTAIN DIRECTION. THERE MAY BE A MULTIPOLAR PRESS, WHICH WOULD EXPRESS SEVERAL OPINIONS, BUT COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT? IT DOES NOT EXIST.**

“ **THE ONLINE MEDIA SHARE WHAT THEY CONSIDER TO BE TRUE. IT IS UP TO US WHETHER WE CONSIDER THESE THINGS TRUE OR NOT, AND HOW MUCH WE SEEK THE TRUTH.**

Some participants did point out that, due to grants offered by international organisations, the Moldovan media has become more independent in recent times. But they said there remained plenty of room for improvement and national

media outlets were not yet at the level of Romanian or EU-wide media institutions.





REUTERS/Vladislav Culiomza

GOOD JOURNALISM

Participants in the focus group discussions were asked to say how they would define “good journalism”. It was seen as a combination of personality traits and journalistic skills:

- **Effective writing:** technical writing and source attribution, producing error-free, grammatically correct and concise articles with factual information.
- **Research:** relying only on facts and evidence to uncover the truth, employing analytical skills, being aware of current events, being able to make connections with other events, extracting relevant information from a story and using experts.
- **Cross-checking:** fact-checking and accessing any records necessary to confirm a story, connecting with potential sources to confirm or to deny the information or events depicted, seeking out witnesses, seeking comments from various sides, seeking expert opinion and assessment.
- **Independence/ethics:** a good journalist should not abandon their personal sense of ethics and responsibility. The journalist should possess integrity, fairness, objectivity, impartiality, and render the facts to inform the audience instead of

subjective impressions or points of view, and be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information.

“ PRESENTERS FROM [CHANNEL NAME] ARE EXAMPLES OF GOOD JOURNALISTS. AS LONG AS THE INFORMATION IS PRESENTED IN AN IMPOSING WAY, WE GET THE IMPRESSION THAT IT IS TRUE INFORMATION, AND THIS IS VERY MUCH RELATED TO THE PRESENTER.

“ IT IS A PLEASURE TO FOLLOW THE NEWS BULLETIN ON [CHANNEL]. ON OTHER CHANNELS SOME JOURNALISTS SEEM TO HAVE A MASK ON THEIR FACE AND PRESENT THE NEWS WITHOUT INTEREST.

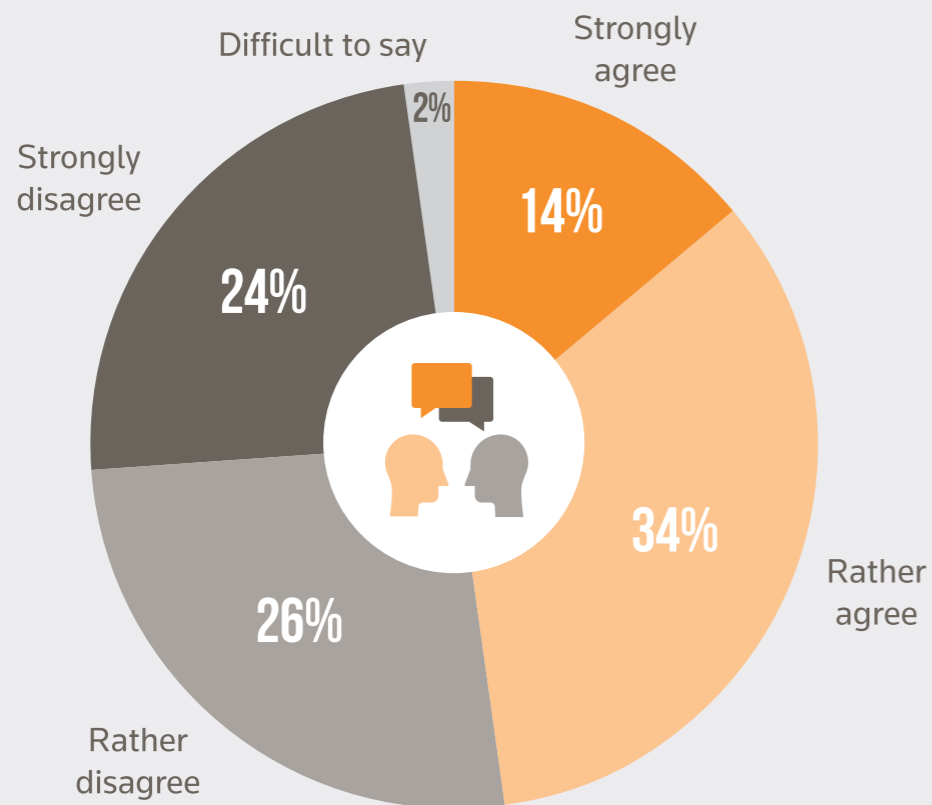
When asked to provide examples of good journalism in Moldova, most participants mentioned individual personalities in traditional media, rather than social media platforms or outlets more generally. This included political talk-show hosts and news bulletin presenters. Some did highlight the investigative press, as these journalists dig deeper and reveal more details about politicians or state officials to help audience to be informed better and to form an objective opinion of public figures.

The survey results reveal mixed views on some aspects of journalism. Only two in five (38%) agreed that the journalism they consumed was neutral, detached and objective, including just 7% who strongly believed that it was. While 15% thought that they did not consume this type of journalism, the most common response was that it was difficult to say (47%). This corresponds with the general lack of trust in news.

At the same time, respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that the journalism they consumed asked tough questions to influential and powerful people – 48% believe this is true compared with 26% who do not and 26% who are unsure.

CHART 8: TOUGH QUESTIONS

“The journalism I consume asks tough questions to influential and powerful people”



Half (50%) say that they often or sometimes watch, read or listen to reports that they do not agree with, but almost the same proportion say they rarely (31%) or never (15%) do. This suggests that a large proportion of audiences rely on media that affirms their views rather than challenging them or offering different perspectives.

Men and women share similar attitudes towards good journalism. Twice as many younger adults (18-34s) compared with older adults (55+ years) did not think the journalism they consumed asked tough questions of influential and powerful people (31% vs. 15%). Those with higher levels of education were more likely to consume media reports they did not agree with.

To gain a better understanding of how people judge and review good journalism, the participants in the focus group discussions were given two short articles to read. Article 1 was about a youth forum of ethnic minorities in Chisinau supported by the Office of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Article 2 was an article produced by a participant on one of TRF’s training courses concerning stories focusing on the impact of Covid-19 on women’s health and abortions.

Most participants considered both articles to be examples of good journalism, and appreciated that the subject matter was of social importance. The preamble in one of the articles was seen as useful and the summary welcome. Even if participants were more likely to read shorter content (many of them said they would

not usually read such a long article if the topic was not of interest), they acknowledged that the information was well structured – divided into sub-topics – and was therefore easily accessible. The journalists referred to experts, to statistical data and to the legislation in force, giving the articles more value and veracity.

“ IT IS STRUCTURED QUALITATIVELY, SCIENTIFICALLY, FULL OF USEFUL DATA AND INFORMATION.

The criticism from some participants was mainly around the length and some of the complex terminology used. These people believed that good journalism should inform the public in a concise manner. Too much detail in an article could make it seem irrelevant or hard to read, and the lack of references to sources could raise concern. In addition, the fact that neither article named the author was regarded by some as suspicious.

“ IT SEEMS TO BE WRITTEN BY A STATE INSTITUTION THAT HELD AN EVENT AND THEN WROTE ABOUT IT.

“ I WOULD LIKE TO SEE A SOURCE JUSTIFYING THE FIGURES.

“ THE ARTICLE IS A DRY STATEMENT OF FACTS, SOMETIMES NOT VERY LITERATE AND VERY DIFFICULT TO READ.



REUTERS/Vladislav Culiomza

CASE STUDY: MEDIA REPORTING OF COVID-19

Participants in the focus groups were asked for their views on how well the media in Moldova had reported Covid-19.

There were some positive evaluations. The flow of information at the start of the pandemic achieved the goal of encouraging people to wear masks and to avoid public places. This helped to avoid mass transmission of the disease given the low in-patient capacity in hospitals. Others believed that the media always provided up-to-date information, and that there was a lot of information on the internet and on television available to everyone. However, some believed there was too much information and that the pandemic had been exaggerated.

“ THE MOLDOVAN PRESS HAS GREATLY EXAGGERATED THE INFORMATION ABOUT COVID, ABOUT MORTALITY TOO. I HAVE SUCH A FEELING. THIS IS VERY EMBELLISHED. THEREFORE I TAKE IT EASY.

“ THERE IS SO MUCH PANIC NOW, EVEN GLOBALLY. LOOK AT THIS VACCINE-RELATED HYSTERIA. THERE ARE NO CLEAR, REAL, TRUE STATISTICS. IT'S JUST PSYCHOLOGICAL HYSTERIA.

Criticisms of the media centred around the quality of the information. Some accused the media of lacking relevant data and not presenting information that would be genuinely useful.

“ DURING THE PANDEMIC, OUR COUNTRY HAS BEEN PRESENTED WITH POOR QUALITY INFORMATION COMPARED TO HOW THIS TOPIC WAS TREATED BY INTERNATIONAL SOURCES, FOR EXAMPLE THE BBC, THE GUARDIAN, NEWSKY; FRENCH SITES LIKE LE FIGARO, LE MONDE... I DID NOT RECEIVE ANY RATIONAL INFORMATION. IT BROUGHT MORE PANIC THAN INFORMATION. I LEARNED MORE ON FOREIGN SITES.”

There was scepticism and confusion among some regarding Covid statistics, and this may partly explain the high levels who think Covid is a hoax (see below). Criticisms range from a lack of explanation of statistics to a belief that fake information was spread – particularly around vaccines – to promote the financial interests of certain people.

“ DURING THE PANDEMIC, ALL THE TV STATIONS PRESENT ONLY STATISTICS ABOUT THE DEAD, THE INFECTED AND THE MASK – THAT'S ALL.

“ I HAVE NOT SEEN ANY TELEVISION TAKE CLEAR STATISTICS FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO MAKE VERY SPECIFIC COMPARISONS: THAT IS, DEATHS AMONG PEOPLE WHO SUFFERED FROM OTHER PROBLEM. WHAT WAS THE DEATH RATE AMONG CANCER PATIENTS, WHAT WAS THE MORTALITY RATE IN PREVIOUS YEARS DUE TO THE FLU?

“ I AM THINKING OF FRAUDULENT SCHEMES ... A LOT OF VACCINES OF DUBIOUS ORIGIN HAVE EMERGED. ALL THIS IS SPREAD THROUGH VIBER, WHATSAPP, AND THIS IS UNCONFIRMED INFORMATION. PEOPLE BELIEVE IT. IT'S JUST A DESIRE TO MAKE A PROFIT ON SALES. THERE IS A LOT OF FAKE NEWS ABOUT CORONAVIRUS NOW.

Six in ten adults (60%) reported changing their behaviour as a result of news they read about Covid-19, rising to 73% of adults aged over 55 years. While it is always very difficult for people to directly correlate changes in their attitudes or behaviour to particular events or news stories – and perhaps this is even more true in the case of Covid-19, given how dominant an issue it has been over the past year or so – this finding does illustrate the fact that the majority of people believe that the media can and does influence their behaviour.

Despite the widespread reporting of the pandemic, a relatively high proportion of adults in Moldova claim that Covid is a hoax (20%). This

is considerably higher than the proportion of adults in Georgia who feel the same (4%), but in line with attitudes in Ukraine (17%). In Moldova, 17% of women think Covid is a hoax, along with 24% of men; and while 13% of over-55s think it is a hoax this rises to 22% of 18-35s. Those with lower educational attainment are twice as likely to think Covid is a hoax.

In the focus groups the participants explained why they think there is such a relatively high level of denial about Covid. The reasons given include that the former president initially minimised the danger of the virus; there was non-compliance by the church with the rules and restrictions imposed by the authorities; the Moldovan health system was not prepared to cope with a pandemic; and the sheer amount of information given over a short period at the beginning of the pandemic fuelled both panic and conspiracy theories. Others posit that some people do not believe in Covid because of mistrust, because they have not experienced it personally, or because of the huge amount of information. For them, the response to the information overload was to avoid the subject altogether.

“ IT WAS EASIER TO THINK THAT THIS WAS A CONSPIRACY, SOMEONE'S GAME, SO IT WOULD BE EASIER FOR EACH OF US TO FIND AN EXCUSE FOR WHY WE WERE FORCED TO STAY AT HOME.



REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina



REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko

RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media and digital forms of news and information are very important in Moldova, particularly for younger adults. While TV is still a key media outlet for older people – and remains a favoured source of news for some – many are turning to online news and information sources.

Digital platforms have many benefits, but they are also open to abuse and exploitation. There is clearly a desire for good, quality journalism, yet most people do not necessarily think this is currently being provided. The challenge for independent media is to demonstrate to the public how it is independent and why independence matters. This needs to go further than explaining ownership or editorial policy (though both are critical). People want to consume good journalism and to have facts explained to them in a balanced way through outlets with a positive image and ‘personality’.

The evidence generated in this research suggests that those interested in strengthening independent media should consider the following:

Wider media development recommendations

- 1) **Create a shared definition of independent media within the sector.** Future programming should try to create a shared definition and way of articulating

what independent media is and seek to encourage all independent media to use this definition publicly on their platforms. Once in place independent media should conduct a collaborative awareness campaign to publicise this to their audiences in a consistent and coherent manner to increase audience knowledge of independent media’s unique selling points.

- 2) **Increase public awareness of what independent media is and how it can be identified.** This could include a country-wide marketing campaign to explain the definition of independent media and why it is important, and more targeted campaigns to improve media literacy in schools and universities.

- 3) **Engage associations and media NGOs.** Journalism associations and NGOs could be the standard-bearers driving the media to commit to this definition and implement a journalistic code of ethics.

- 4) **Embed the journalistic code of ethics.** Our research suggests that audiences are seeking good journalism, but do not always associate this with independent media. Future journalism and media development programmes should

promote the journalistic code of ethics as a starting point of mentorship and ensure all individuals and organisations striving toward independence and good journalism embed these ethics in their work and ways of operating.

5) Continue training and mentorship in content improvement. Continue to provide training on how to produce objective and balanced content, together with support to ensure that the presentation is appealing and engaging both in terms of professionalism and production quality.

Recommendations for media and journalists

1) Focus on quality and impartiality. Audiences are seeking impartial, reliable, and balanced journalism. Outlets and individuals should focus on quality rather than quantity to ensure that they produce content which audiences perceive as good journalism. Independent journalists should separate reporting of facts and statistics from their own interpretation and, where possible, provide audiences with a diversity of views.

2) Personalise independent media branding. Audiences have greater trust in individuals, either experts or journalists. Organisations should consider how they can personalise their brand. In particular digital media, which do not at present

have a public figurehead such as a news anchor, should identify ways in which their audience can familiarise themselves with their team of journalists. This could be open editorial meetings and biographies on websites.

3) Ensure you have trusted sources. In tandem, independent media should consider how to make better use of experts and trusted journalists who may be in a better position to enhance the trustworthiness of their content and support the development of trusted relationships with different audiences.

4) Ensure multiple distribution options. Ensure content produced is easily accessible, especially across different digital platforms. In the case of Moldova this would include Facebook, YouTube and Viber. Independent media outlets should also be supported so that their content can be found on search engines and aggregators, for example through search engine optimisation, link words, meta tags and key words.



REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko



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